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LABOR RELATIONS IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Description

This paper is the introductory chapter to section-- of the Civil Affairs Handbook for Germany. It discusses the role of trade unionism in the Weimar Republic, the organization of the labor market, the influence of the trade unions on the state, industrial disputes and the development of wages and income, and the causes for the collapse of the system.

7 January 1944

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Labor Relations in the Weimar Republic

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LABOR RELATIONS IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Introduction

The outstanding characteristic in the relationship between capital and labor during the Weimar Republic was the recognition of the trade union movements in the Weimar Constitution of 1919 and the increasing role of the trade union movement in the economic, social, and political fields. It is not an exaggeration to say that the rise and decline of the Weimar Republic is almost identical with the development of trade unionism.

Trade unions fulfilled three different functions, which may be summarized as follows: 1) They were fraternal societies, based on the principle of mutual help, assisting the members in the most diverse ways, granting them sickness and accidents benefits, unemployment pay, old-age allowances; they provided legal aid, and they established an exchange system of educational institutions. 2) Trade unions were marketing organizations for collective bargaining; they either laid down the conditions of work or saw to it that state-regulated provisions were faithfully executed. 3) Trade unions were, moreover, political pressure groups influencing the State, its legislative, executive, and judicial apparatus, and the political parties.

The history of trade unionism in Germany passed through the same stages through which any other European trade movement progressed, namely, the stages of prohibition, toleration, and full recognition.

The era of prohibition started with the Prussian Allgemeine Landrecht which forbade the stoppage of work and so prevented the use of the main trade union weapon, the strike. The Prussian Industrial Code of 1845 prescribed severe punishments for workers who attempted to induce other persons to bring pressure to bear on the authorities or to effect a stoppage of work. A law of 24 April 1854 extended these bans on combinations of domestic servants, agricultural and forest laborers, river and ship workers. The Prussian Mine Act of 1860 forbade industrial combinations among the miners.

In Austria the Penal Code of 1803 prohibited every kind of agreement among workers and the Code of 1852 interdicted various forms of industrial organization.

Most of these prohibitions collapsed late in the nineteenth century simply because they proved unworkable. The Industrial Code (Gewerbeordnung) of the North German Federation abolished the ban, but only for industrial workers. Nevertheless, criminal laws imposed severe difficulties on trade union activities. The repeal of Bismarck's anti-Socialist laws and the enactment of the Industrial Code in 1890 made it possible after the establishment of the Reich to form the central organization of the trade unions, Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften, a central body of the free, i.e., Socialist, unions.